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REPORT

Youth Innovating Democracy

Youth event of the New Democratic Pact for Europe

European Youth Centre

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Executive summary

This report presents the outcomes of *Youth Innovating Democracy*, the principal youth consultation informing the New Democratic Pact for Europe. Convened in Strasbourg under the Presidency of Monaco of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, in partnership with the European Youth Forum, the event brought together 120 young people, youth organisations, public authorities and elected representatives from across Europe to explore how democracy can better respond to the realities and aspirations of younger generations. Among the delegates were those who had lived through contested elections, protest crackdowns and war, reminding all present that democratic rights are never permanently secured.

The event's principal outcome is the [Manifesto – Youth visions for a European Democracy in 2049](#), which sets out a shared vision for democracy at the Council of Europe's centenary alongside fifteen measures for institutional, social and structural renewal.

Across three thematic strands, grounded in the Council of Europe's tradition of non-formal human rights education, participants identified barriers to meaningful democratic participation and developed proposals for addressing them. While the recommendations span institutional reform, social rights and community participation, they are underpinned by a common understanding that democracy must be experienced as participatory, inclusive and accountable in everyday life.

Participants identified an increasing disconnect between young people and institutions. Rebuilding trust requires structural rather than symbolic change, including opening political systems to younger generations through electoral reform, intergenerational power-sharing and stronger protections of civic spaces, both online and offline. Discussions also emphasised that political involvement cannot be separated from social and economic conditions. Affordable housing, decent work, healthcare, representation and gender equality were identified not simply as matters of social policy, but as preconditions for democratic engagement. Likewise, racism and discrimination were recognised as enduring contradictions of the democratic promise.

Safe civic spaces also emerged as fundamental conditions for healthy democracies, with restrictions on protests and targeted harassment of young activists, civic leaders and office-holders recurring throughout the consultation. Young people further argued that participation depends on durable democratic infrastructure: recommendations called for legally guaranteed and adequately resourced youth councils, stronger accountability for violations of participation rights – within and beyond authoritarian contexts –, sustained investment in youth organisations and community-led media literacy, democracy and citizenship education. The Council of Europe's

[co-management model](#) emerged repeatedly as an example of good practice, which, if mainstreamed, could support democratic renewal.

Beyond the recommendations, young people identified several priorities for implementation: sustained dialogue rather than one-off consultation, transparent follow-up on each proposal, and embedding the outcomes in the Council of Europe's long-term work. The Manifesto and the participatory process through which it was developed demonstrate the Council of Europe's recognition that meaningful youth participation is essential if democracy is to evolve with the realities of a rapidly changing world.

I Introduction

1.1 Context

Democracy in Europe is under visible strain. War, shifting geopolitics, democratic backsliding, rising impunity, the climate crisis, disinformation and rapid technological change threaten the peace and stability that the continent has built – with the heaviest burden falling on the generation set to inherit them.

In response, the Council of Europe has been engaging a wide set of stakeholders – governments, parliamentarians, local and regional authorities, international partners, civil society, academia, the private sector and citizens – in search of a common way forward. This is the basis for the New Democratic Pact for Europe proposed by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Alain Berset. The process towards the Pact does not attempt to reinvent democracy; it seeks to reinforce its foundations, to renew its form and to “restore trust in democracy by making it tangible in people’s daily lives through participation, accountability and equal access to rights” (Council of Europe 2025b). Contributions to the Pact are structured around its three pillars: learning and practising democracy, protecting democratic systems, and building democratic resilience. The directions set during the consultation phase, which runs until December 2026, will shape its vision and the work that follows (Council of Europe 2026).

The Youth Innovating Democracy event served as an important avenue for engaging young people in this process through open consultation and structured dialogue grounded in the values and methods of non-formal and human rights education.

Young people’s participation is not a recent addition to the Council of Europe’s policy agenda. The Organisation has long developed distinctive mechanisms for involving young people in democratic decision-making, notably through its co-management system, in which representatives of governments and youth organisations jointly establish the youth sector’s priorities, objectives and budgets.

This approach was further reinforced in 2025 at the 10th Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth, held in Valletta, Malta, on 8-9 October, where ministers reaffirmed the importance of youth participation and adopted a resolution on the [Council of Europe Reference Framework on a Youth Perspective](#) (Council of Europe 2025a). The Framework is designed to integrate young people’s perspectives not only within the youth sector, but across policy areas, and creates scope for national youth councils and other representative youth structures to play a stronger role in

organising participation and consultation beyond the youth field. Furthermore, in 2026, the Committee of Ministers joined the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities in responding to the needs and aspirations of young people through the adoption of the Recommendation CM/Rec (2026)3 on the [European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life](#), strengthening the Organisation's multilevel framework for youth participation.

1.2 Purpose and objectives of the event

Youth Innovating Democracy was the key youth event of the consultation phase leading towards the New Democratic Pact for Europe. It was organised in the framework of the Presidency of Monaco of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe and in partnership with the European Youth Forum, continuing the long-standing cooperation between the Council of Europe and youth civil society.

The event also built on the experience and the democratic innovations developed by youth organisations and participatory laboratories across Europe, and on the key proposals and achievements of young people and youth civil society over the previous four years. This includes the Youth Action Week Democracy Now! (Strasbourg, 2022), organised within the Democracy Here | Democracy Now campaign, where young people have consistently drawn attention to the need for urgent action to recommit to democracy. They have also developed concrete proposals, including the Call for Action (Council of Europe 2022), the message of the youth event Confidence in tomorrow (Council of Europe 2024) and the conclusions of the youth event of the 10th Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth.

Over the three days, participants:

- contributed to shaping the New Democratic Pact for Europe through critical discussion and proposals on how to innovate and revitalise democracy;
- shared practices and initiatives from their own organisations and contexts, across the thematic strands of the event;
- engaged with political representatives from the Council of Europe and its member states for advocacy, networking and dialogue;
- engaged, as key partners, with the Council of Europe's values and work, particularly the New Democratic Pact for Europe.

A further objective ran across the whole programme: the collaborative development of a [Manifesto for a European Democracy in 2049](#), marking the centenary of the Council of Europe. Conceived

as a living document, the Manifesto outlines a vision of how democracy in Europe should look, feel and function by then, together with concrete measures for the Council of Europe, member states and civil society to help realise that vision.

The event was prepared by a team of representatives of the Advisory Council on Youth, the European Steering Committee for Youth (CDEJ) and the European Youth Forum, with the support of the Secretariat of the Council of Europe Youth Department.

1.3 Format, structure and methodology

“Some of the most thought-provoking conversations I have had about democracy have been with young people. Not because they hold all the answers, but because they dare to dream, and ask the questions that others have stopped asking. “

(Alain Berset, Secretary General of the Council of Europe, 24 June 2026)

The event brought together some 120 young people in all their diversity: leaders, activists, and representatives of youth organisations, including members of the Advisory Council on Youth, youth initiatives and movements, as well as representatives of national authorities and elected officials, from across Europe.

The three-day programme was grounded in the Council of Europe’s tradition of non-formal human rights education, emphasising participation, democratic deliberation, creativity and action. Participants deliberated across different backgrounds, politics and languages – the working languages were English and French – and developed joint proposals in break-out group discussions.

On the first day, during the sessions “Youth visions: a manifesto for a European democracy”, participants worked in six parallel groups on their visions of European democracy in 2049. On the second and third days, they engaged in democratic dialogue across three thematic strands:

- Juvenating politics: innovating the system;
- Equality alive: the promise of democracy;
- Empower communities: an ecosystem for youth democratic participation.

Each strand was asked to examine key challenges, exchange practices and experiences, and agree collectively on up to seven final proposals. Each worked with dedicated facilitators and received interventions from resource persons: Andreea Scioşteanu, Vice-President of the European Youth Forum, Nina Grmuša, Advisor on Youth Perspective at the Council of Europe,

and Alessandro Padovan, Advisory Council on Youth (Juvenating politics); Aoife Nolan, President of the European Committee of Social Rights (online), and Dragoș Tarța and Nina Portolan, Advisory Council on Youth (Equality alive); and Claudia Luciani, Director at the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Marcus Melau, Advisory Council on Youth and Gordana Berjan, Head of European Youth Foundation (Empower communities).

Plenary exchanges with the political leadership of the Council of Europe were woven throughout the programme. They went beyond a hearing of views, giving participants direct opportunities to put forward proposals, raise concerns and ask questions – including those without immediate answers. In the keynote address, Alain Berset, Secretary General of the Council of Europe, shared the vision of creating solutions that escape the "dictator of the short term". Whilst this habit of thinking within immediate political and electoral horizons has become common in politics, the Pact aims to set the ground for the decades ahead – the future in which younger generations will live.

Ambassador Gabriel Revel, Permanent Representative of Monaco to the Council of Europe and President of the Ministers' Deputies, and Béatrice Fresko-Rolfo, Chairperson of the delegation of Monaco to the Parliamentary Assembly, brought the voice of the Presidency. Yevheniia Kravchuk, Youth Rapporteur of the Parliamentary Assembly's Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media, exchanged with participants on youth in parliamentary life and on the digital environment, while a dedicated session with the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities connected the discussions to local and regional democracy. On the final day, the proposals emerging from the event were presented to Petra Bayr, President of the Parliamentary Assembly, in an exchange on youth political engagement. Marja Ruotanen, Director General of Democracy and Human Dignity, closed the event.

Liliya Elenkova, Chair of the Joint Council on Youth, and Emma Wedner, Chair of the Advisory Council on Youth addressed the participants on behalf of the Council of Europe's co-management bodies. Rareş Voicu, President of the European Youth Forum, contributed to the discussion with opening remarks – and presenting the Secretary General with an invitation to the Council of Europe's centenary on 5 May 2049 – and with advocacy tips in the final session¹.

(Invitation to the 100th anniversary of the Council of Europe, 5 May 2049, presented to Secretary General Alain Berset – and signed by his successor in office)

Throughout the event, records for this report were captured by the General Rapporteur and by the rapporteurs who joined each break-out session, drawing together participant contributions and external expert interventions. These are synthesised here, with the key takeaways and the main themes emerging from the debates, held in the event's two working languages, English and French. Participants' words are quoted throughout, and speakers are named only with their consent. The full Manifesto with the proposals which emerged from the strands and the event programme are attached in the Annex.

II Youth visions of democracy: towards a Manifesto for 2049

“Young people will no longer have to fight for everything, their voices will be heard.”

(event participant)

2.1 An overview

The Manifesto builds on the deliberations and ideas expressed by young people during the event. It has two parts: an opening section that moves from memories and emotions to forward-looking statements, followed by a set of concrete measures addressed to the Council of Europe, local, regional and national authorities, and civil society more broadly. The development of the text was rooted in a participatory approach and followed a several-step process.

¹ Rareş highlighted three tests for effective advocacy: having specific ask, requesting one concrete thing rather than everything at once; identifying the right audience, knowing which institution or body actually has the power to act; and engaging the right allies.

On the afternoon of the first day, participants worked in six parallel groups over two and a half hours to explore their hopes, dreams and aspirations for their communities and for democracy in Europe. They were asked to contemplate on the following question:

“If you had a say in it, what could be better in your community or in Europe? Imagine it is 2049 and you are looking back at how democracy in Europe evolved from now on. What changed, and how did young people, like you, make a difference?”

(working question, session "Youth visions: a manifesto for a European democracy")

Participants found value in this approach, noting that dreaming is helpful because it allows “taking a step back from all the firefighting we are doing all of the time”.

The process of envisioning was not without challenges. Reflecting on what democracy makes them feel, participants identified fatigue, worry, guilt, anger, fear and confusion. Yet these feelings soon changed. One rapporteur captured the arc of emotions: at the beginning, many participants were overwhelmed by concern but by the end, many described feeling hopeful about democracy in 2049.

2.2 Visions of democracy: a synthesis

“I prefer the most imperfect of democracies to the most perfect of dictatorships.”

(Sandro Pertini, former President of Italy, quoted by a participant)

Across the six rooms, ideas varied, but a shared sentiment emerged: in the words of one group, democracy is not just “a set of rules and procedures” but a culture to live, a daily practice (“like sport”), which mirrors the harmonious aspects of nature. Several recurring themes emerged from the working groups, highlighted below.

Democracy as participation

Participants imagined a citizen-centred democracy rather than a purely representative one – “less pyramidal, and less distant from its base”. They envisaged politics as a temporary civic mission, not a lifelong career, supported by local citizens’ assemblies of people aged 8 to 88, who were directly involved in local decision-making together with elected bodies. Young people also proposed lowering the voting age to 16, introducing youth quotas built on the same principle as gender quotas and demographic age distribution, and establishing children’s and youth councils as a standard feature of public administrations.

As one participant put it, “We (desperately) need participation across more levels, with more early entry points into the political arena.” To realise this vision, participants identified a need for investment in resources, in human rights education and in access to reliable information.

Furthermore, the participants noted that for young people to participate in policy and decision-making spaces, getting elected is not enough: strategies to support youth empowerment must also address the targeted hate and abuse that many young politicians experience, especially online.

Democracy as equality of opportunity

The participants imagined a world where “young people get the financial and social opportunities to engage in volunteer work”. Naming equitable access as a precondition for participation itself, one participant observed that if you are drowning in student debt and working twenty hours a week alongside your studies, you may never have the time or financial security to engage in civic life. These concerns echoed through the discussions, where ideas such as a universal basic income were raised as a way to address the cost-of-living crisis and support the practical conditions for democratic participation.

Democracy as justice

Racism and discrimination were named as enduring contradictions of the democratic promise to be addressed with meaningful representation of ethnic, religious, linguistic and indigenous minorities. The participants emphasised that the struggle for democratic justice remains unfinished everywhere.

For young people, future-making should be informed by the diverse lessons of the past, whether its struggles, revolutions, injustices, or achievements. The Europe of 2049 was imagined as having confronted its own place within that history. Capturing the vision, one of the Manifesto rapporteurs wrote:

“It should be a democracy without wars, without discrimination, and with a real recognition and reparation of past injustices, including decolonisation.”

(Manifesto rapporteur’s record)

Across several rooms, participants used artistic expressions: they combined poetry, protest song and historical memory to articulate what they meant by democratic values. They recalled Federico

García Lorca's *Poeta en Nueva York*, written in 1929-30, in which he denounced indifference towards "the other half":

*Yo denuncio a toda la gente
que ignora la otra mitad,
la mitad irredimible
que levanta sus montes de cemento
donde laten los corazones
de los animalitos que se olvidan
y donde caeremos todos
en la última fiesta de los taladros.*

(extract from Federico García Lorca's poem, "New York (Office and Denunciation)", *Poeta en Nueva York*)

*I denounce everyone
who ignores the other half,
the half beyond redemption,
who raise their mountains of cement
where the hearts beat
of the small animals we forget
and where we will all fall
in the last feast of the drills.*

(English translation)

Inspirations from art and from those who advanced democracy ran throughout the Manifesto group discussions. On another floor, a participant shared Toussaint Louverture's words on the felled tree of Black liberty – "It will spring back from the roots, for they are deep and numerous" – and named Christiane Taubira, who carried the recognition of slavery as a crime against humanity into law, among those who have moved democracy forward.

Democracy as peace and safe civic space

One group envisioned 2049 as a year in which weapons and violence will no longer be used to resolve conflict, and will be replaced by dialogue and consensus-building. They linked this to two further conditions for a functioning European democracy: confronting the climate crisis, and upholding the Council of Europe's pillars of the rule of law and human rights.

It should be highlighted that young people from diverse backgrounds joined the event, including some who had lived through contested elections, protest crackdowns and war. They reminded fellow participants that democratic rights are never permanently guaranteed and need people who stay vigilant in defending them. One young person recounted how a small act of protest grew into a larger movement in the face of state repression and violence (one that ended in the death of a protester) and how living through this had brought their community closer together in the hope of building a better future for their country.

In some rooms, the same instinct to reach for cultural memory took the form of song rather than testimony: a participant recalled how Georgian protesters kept singing the anthem during the 2024-25 demonstrations amid assault by the authorities, a symbol of perseverance under repression.

Poetry returned in these discussions too, to express the relationship between peace, freedom and democracy. Marwan Makhoul's lines captured the connection between conflict, silence and the conditions necessary for civic expression:

*"In order for me to write poetry that isn't political,
I must listen to the birds,
And in order to hear the birds,
The warplanes must be silent."*

(Marwan Makhoul, shared by a participant)

Democracy as community, care and joy

Participants saw democracy as both a responsibility and a celebration, requiring sustainable funding for the arts and culture. Capturing a common sentiment, participants suggested that not every funded activity needs to be serious, produce an output and end in a mandatory five-page report. Sometimes, they said, creating civic engagement is as simple as putting people from different backgrounds into a room and "watching the magic happen".

Democracy as knowledge, truth and education

"Democracy is only as good as the education that surrounds it."

(event participant)

Young people repeatedly expressed concern about political corruption, inequality and misinformation. The remedy, as they saw it, is education – “the most important tool to get from start to finish”.

Ideas ranged widely: democracy education from primary school onwards; civic education that teaches “the art of debate” so that disagreement stays friendly; and a universal year of civic education – half international, half local – with media literacy for all. Running through these discussions was an intergenerational vision of democratic learning, which would require financial investment, and mainstreaming of human rights education as both a lens and a focal point.

Access to reliable information was identified as essential, with participants noting that it should go “both ways”, supporting intergenerational and multi-perspective dialogue in which older generations also receive news that reflects youth perspectives.

The shared vision that emerged across the six working groups was first documented by the Manifesto rapporteurs², then synthesised by Natalia Kallio (European Youth Forum) into a draft Manifesto. The draft was circulated to the preparatory team and read aloud to participants for discussion and endorsement. The vision presented above therefore reflects both the workshop discussions and the synthesis that participants collectively endorsed through the Manifesto. Taken together, the six rooms sketched a single horizon for 2049: a democracy that is participatory, equitable and just, committed to peace, grounded in knowledge, and lived daily with community, care and joy.

III Findings from the thematic strands

The second and third days belonged to the three thematic strands. While Day 1 asked what young people imagine for the future, the strands asked what it will take to get there. The full Manifesto and the strand proposals appear in the Annex; the sections below discuss and contextualise them.

3.1 Juvenating politics: innovating the system

The mapping exercise put lack of trust, literally, at the centre – and the strand insisted the deficit runs both ways: young people’s lack of trust in decision-makers and the system, and decision-makers’ and voters’ lack of trust in young people.

² All rapporteurs are listed at the end of the report.

Around it lay the structural barriers. The rules themselves – a voting age of 18 in most countries, and candidacy ages of up to 25 for national parliaments – keep young people out of the rooms where decisions are made. The standard arguments for keeping it that way – that young people are still developing, that they mostly do not pay taxes – were named and challenged by participants, who pointed out that in several countries one can work and pay taxes from 15 or 16. The result is stark: only 2.8% of the world's parliamentarians are aged 30 and under (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2025).

The evidence for voting at 16 came partly from the room itself: participants described how younger voters, aware that they're being watched, tend to "walk the extra mile to 'earn' that vote". A resource person cited data from Austria and Scotland showing that people who start voting young keep voting through the early twenties. Malta, already pairing a lower voting age with easier routes into office, came up as a further case. The strand linked the vote to candidacy (thresholds as high as 25 were named) and called for candidacy ages to fall to at least 18. Participants also found inspiration in the example of Zohran Mamdani, who faced repeated attacks on his inexperience during the 2025 New York mayoral race – and won it, having once said "What I don't have in experience, I make up for in integrity."

Alongside the questions of access, the strand addressed the challenge of polarisation, highlighting that it is young people who act as bridgebuilders and reach across the divide. Some continue this work in increasingly authoritarian contexts, at significant personal risk. Participants therefore called for greater recognition and support. Notably, their discussion echoed the Secretary General's plenary remarks, which emphasised the importance of ensuring diversity in peacebuilding processes.

Beyond the questions of representation and political inclusion, participants noted that democratic participation increasingly depends on the digital environments where young people receive information, deliberate and organise. This brought the discussion to the digital ecosystem as democratic infrastructure, building directly on plenary exchanges on platform regulation and young people's digital rights. Yevheniia Kravchuk, Youth Rapporteur of the Parliamentary Assembly's Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media, shared evidence gathered during the Assembly's fact-finding work. Her research showed that boys registering on TikTok or YouTube for the first time are quickly fed misogynistic content, with algorithmic recommendations repeatedly reinforcing the same messages and normalising "something that's not necessarily normal".

Continuing the discussion within the strand, participants highlighted that banning platforms is not the answer: a ban treats young people as passive objects of care rather than rights holders, while leaving untouched the addictive design, push notifications and engagement-driven algorithms that make the online environment unsafe in the first place. The demand instead was that programmes, policies and platforms be tailored to people's needs. The same lens turned to opportunity – e-petitions, e-voting, e-ID and civic chatbots as tools that make participation faster and more appealing – and to cost, with the energy demand of data centres raising a pointed question about whether the strand actually wanted this power:

“The European Union by 2035 is expected to expand its digital data space by three times. Data centres require immense, enormous energy. Do we want this power? Do we want to try to find sustainable solutions? Do we need to fund research?”

(Alessandro Padovan, Advisory Council on Youth)

Yet the same digital environments that can expand participation can expose those who participate publicly to new forms of harm. The strand therefore turned to the safety of those who step forward, building on the Day 1 exchange with Kravchuk, who highlighted the case of a member of the European Parliament who chose not to run after both she and her children were threatened, hence noting that even the EU's own Digital Services Act is “so much behind what's going on”. The strand's discussions focused on hate directed at young people who hold public office, concluding that protection is a precondition of representation.

Areas of tension

While broad agreement emerged around the need for institutional reform, several questions remained contested. During discussions on how they feel about young people in far-right and conservative parties, participants pulled in several directions. One named a double standard: parties and media that championed a lower voting age while the young leaned left call young men “brainwashed” if they vote for conservative wing parties. “I kind of see a paradox”, said a participant working in Norwegian public debate.

A second answer reached for evidence over narrative: in Lithuania, school mock elections held days before real ones produced results “strikingly similar to the general population” – suggesting, as a resource person put it, “a battle of narratives” affecting older generations as much as the young. Exploring the tension, participants asked: “Are we accepting only people who don't vote for the far right, or does every young person have a say?”

The same concern resurfaced on the event's final day in the plenary exchange with Petra Bayr, President of the Parliamentary Assembly, who raised it not as a settled question but as one about what young people's attraction to the far right reveals about European societies more broadly – highlighting the importance of finding ways to communicate and engage with young people across different backgrounds and views.

Climate change, lastly, remained a challenge almost too big to tackle: some saw it as an obstacle to youth participation itself. One participant observed that environmental factors shape whether participation is possible, noting that in the ongoing record heatwave in Strasbourg at the time of the event “if we were to organise a protest today in Strasbourg, we couldn't go. We couldn't go outside without the proper means to go outside.” Others argued that climate change should instead be treated as a transversal challenge that cuts across all the other barriers. Ultimately the group decided not to write a separate proposal on it, but to treat it as a cross-cutting topic for all groups.

Practices, experiences and creative outputs

Participants illustrated these discussions with practical examples operating across Europe, demonstrating that many of the proposed reforms have existing precedents. The strand was unusually rich in working examples: Norway's Ung debatt, which helps young adults get their opinions published in national newspapers; Lithuania's school mock elections, already doing double duty above as evidence, and others, highlighted below.

Incubatorul civic digital (civic digital incubator, Romania)

Through the “Democratic school” programme, the incubator brings pupils, teachers and wider school communities together to develop digital citizenship and democratic competences, while working to make school life itself more democratic. It is run by a consortium of non-governmental organisations, with support from the Ministry of Education and Research. Thirty-two schools have so far received Democratic School status.

City Youth Council of Tartu (Estonia)

Simulation of the city council in which 49 young people experienced committee work, debate and a formal council sitting, ultimately preparing four draft proposals for consideration by local decision makers.

Malta's National Youth Advisory Forum

The forum facilitates the inclusion of nine young people aged 16 to 35 (one of them the Council's own nominee) into the decision-making process. Chaired by the Prime Minister and considered a Cabinet committee, the Forum gives young people an opportunity to advise the Government on laws, strategies and plans being discussed at national or international level.

Every proposal emerging from Juvenating politics sought, in different ways, to rebuild the two-way trust gap identified at the outset. Quotas and consultation forums aim to strengthen decision makers' confidence in young people's capacity to lead, while power-sharing bodies and digital participation seek to restore young people's confidence that democratic institutions are genuinely open to them.

3.2 Equality alive: the promise of democracy

The promise of equal treatment and equal chances is core to democracy. However, the participants arrived carrying the weight of what Aoife Nolan, President of the European Committee of Social Rights, described as the "polycrisis": the accumulated impact of economic crises, war, the rising cost of living and a changing climate, falling disproportionately on the young. Joining the strand online, she captured the stakes succinctly: responses which do not put youth and intergenerational justice at their heart are "doomed to fail young people".

Participants felt strongly that equality is not adjacent to democracy, nor a nice-to-have, but a necessity. Working with Aoife Nolan and with Dragoș Tarța and Nina Portolan of the Advisory Council on Youth, the strand grounded all of its proposals in a single principle: "nothing about us without us".

The discussions first connected to what already exists. Nolan presented the European Social Charter – Europe's "social constitution", binding on 42 of the Council of Europe's 46 member

Racism was mapped as institutional (police violence and surveillance, tokenism, intimidation, one-size-fits-all policy), social (hate speech, identity treated as threat) and economic – with the specific challenges facing Roma and Traveller young people and people of colour. Pointing to a lived reality of tokenism, Alimat Babatunde, a youth participant in the consultation, noted: “People of colour are pushed to the front for photos, but pushed to the back when it’s time for conversations.”

Challenges linked to gender-based discrimination were also highlighted: gaps in sexual and reproductive health and rights, harmful gender norms, and gender-based violence extending into digital spaces, with victims left “proving their victimhood all the time”.

In an expert intervention, Nina Portolan stressed how barriers compound for young people with disabilities, particularly in access to employment, where she cited rates as low as 3% in some member states. At EU level, the disability employment gap stood at 24.0 percentage points among people aged 20-64 in 2024 (Eurostat 2025b). The strand’s first line of response was intersectionality, and here she was clear: intersectionality is “not a separate topic, but the foundation of everything”, adding that accessibility “is not one size fits all. It is not only a ramp, it is information, dialogue, respect for diversity and mechanics for meaningful participation of youth.”

Areas of tension

The strand’s most instructive tension was the one that left a gap in its output: education, a theme every participant cared about, did not result in a concrete proposal. The initial ideas – diversifying curricula, increasing national education budgets, investing in non-formal education, multilingualism – pulled different ways, and in the end the group integrated education into the other proposals instead. Some participants expressed regret that the theme did not lead to a proposal of its own, worrying “that it got lost”.

A second tension was systemic: some participants were frustrated that addressing any of these challenges without action on wealth inequality and capitalist structures would ultimately be ineffective. Nevertheless, measures targeting the private sector proved difficult to include among the final proposals because they fell outside the scope. Separately, within one working group, a proposed measure on human rights and rule-of-law education under the racism theme was set aside partly because some participants “didn’t understand what it meant”.

Practices, experiences and creative outputs

Practice: Charter mechanisms young people can use

The European Social Charter's monitoring system is already there for young people to use, and it's been used before. In Belgium, a complaint by the European Youth Forum over "bogus internships" won a finding that the country's Labour Inspectorate wasn't doing enough to stop disguised unpaid work. In Greece, the Committee struck down an age-discriminatory cut to the minimum wage for under-25s.

(Aoife Nolan, President, European Committee of Social Rights, Equality alive strand, 25 June 2026; European Committee of Social Rights, *European Youth Forum (YFJ) v. Belgium*, Complaint No. 150/2017)

The strand concluded that equality is not a reward for a functioning democracy, but one of its essential foundations. The discussion suggested that precarity is a democratic security issue in the strictest sense: it creates fertile ground for the very movements the Pact seeks to resist. This shifts the focus of democratic protection. Safeguarding democracy means addressing what happens in kitchens, clinics, rental markets and payslips – not only in courts and at the ballot box. It also gives the Pact a proven model of governance: co-management, extended to those whom Europe too often talks about without speaking to.

3.3 Empower communities: an ecosystem for youth democratic participation

The third strand named its overall problem in one phrase – the lack of a sense of power and participation – and answered it with a thesis about infrastructure. “Youth organisations, youth centres and youth work offer unique democratic spaces – places where young people learn not just to discuss democracy, but to live it,” as Liliya Elenkova, Chair of the Joint Council on Youth, put it. Working with Claudia Luciani, Director at the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, and Marcus Melau of the Advisory Council on Youth and Gordana Berjan, Head of European Youth Foundation, the strand asked what it would take for that infrastructure to exist everywhere.

The strand’s challenge map began with democratic literacy and the challenge of engaging those whom the system rarely reaches: how to listen to non-associated, “disassociated” young people and make them part of the process at all. Notably, some people are often absent from decision-

making for reasons as practical as they are structural: language barriers, and economic constraints, and people who have to work have no time for engagement. One participant asked:

“What can we do to give these young people voices, how do we involve them? How can we protect them from being marginalised, how to empower them – and how is this all possible when we are supposed to be equal?”

Another challenge was that Information itself is fragile at the local level. Small towns and rural communities have limited access to media literacy and fact checking, information passes person to person and alters as it goes, and misinformation influences elections.

Tokenism was identified not merely as an irritant but as a risk that narrows youth involvement “and even endangers young people’s safety”. Behind all of it sits the missing legal floor: youth councils and youth spaces without statutory footing, where “politicians show up” for photographs while the councils themselves “experience delayed funding and minimal budgets and support”.

The organising idea was that of democratic infrastructure: democracy is learned where it is lived, so the environments of everyday youth life – organisations, centres, clubs, local councils – are not beneficiaries of democratic policy but mechanisms for delivering it. As the Chair of the Joint Council on Youth has noted in the opening address, democracy “is not sustained by technology, algorithms, or institutions alone. It is sustained by citizens who can think critically, act responsibly, and work together for our common good.”

The strand’s second line was co-management, treated not as something particular to the Council of Europe but as a practice that could travel: there was broad agreement that co-management is a best practice which, “if adapted in other contexts, would already solve or help solving various other issues”.

Another key discussion point was, stated plainly, resources, such as structural funding, separate youth-council budget lines rather than discretionary municipal generosity, and sustainable funding for artistic and cultural endeavours were seen as essential democratic expenditures.

Lastly, design: whatever the strand proposed had to be easy, engaging and accessible – “EEA” became the room’s shorthand – because tools that are hard to use primarily appeal for the already engaged, and therefore should be mindful in expanding their reach.

Areas of tension

The strand's recorded disagreement was small in scope and large in implication: incentives. To reach non-associated young people, should participation come with sweeteners – free food, games, low-threshold formats – as a first step through the door? Or do incentives corrode the intrinsic motivation that makes participation meaningful, and drive away those who came for the substance? The group noticed that positions tracked participants' different backgrounds in and with non-formal education. Ultimately, the question left standing was: "Until when are incentives actually helpful, and when are they harming the process of voluntary participation for the sake of the topic?"

Practices, experiences and creative outputs

The strand built as much as it debated. Its signature creative output is the "phygital" toolkit (boxed below); alongside it, participants pointed to working examples worth multiplying: the youth centre in Palermo as a young, successful model of a space for body and mind, alongside of physical-discussion of quality labels and by exchanges on expanding the European Youth Centre model across Europe.

Creative output: the "phygital" toolkit

Designed as its answer to the democratic-literacy gap: a physical-plus-digital toolkit for local and regional authorities, municipalities and NGOs to host intergenerational dialogue. The toolkit would be delivered through civic-engagement classes, games and ideathons rather than lectures. Its design rules are the strand's values in easy, engaging and accessible way, with input from locals, and it's offered to the Council of Europe as an open, co-developable resource.

(Developed by participants of the Empower communities strand)

The group's proposals convert the sector's soft assets – charters, co-management, youth work – into legal guarantees at a local level; the proposed reporting mechanism follows the same principle: participation rights need remedies, not just standards.

How the measures came together

The Manifesto took shape in two stages. On Day 1, the six vision-building groups and the plenary that followed produced its first part – the shared picture of European democracy in 2049. Over the following two days, each strand developed its own measures and presented them in plenary. Taken together, the three strands voted on nineteen proposals (seven from Juvenating politics and six each from Equality alive and Empower communities), which were consolidated into the Manifesto's second part³. Their premise echoed throughout break-out rooms and was captured in the words of one participant: "'Fairer, faster and simpler' – that's our vision for a youthful democracy in 2049". Both parts of the Manifesto appear in full in the Appendix.

Conclusion and looking ahead

Three days in Strasbourg produced the Manifesto for a European Democracy in 2049, final proposals across three thematic strands, and the harder question every such event leaves behind: what happens next? The answers began arriving before participants had left the building.

The first came on the final afternoon, when the proposals emerging from the Manifesto were presented to the President of the Parliamentary Assembly, Petra Bayr. Her answer sets the standard against which this report invites the follow-up to be measured: "Democracy thrives when young people are not merely consulted but trusted as partners in shaping public life." Europe's youth, she added, "are not waiting for change to happen; they are already leading it" – and the responsibility of democratic institutions, her own Assembly included, is to remain open to that energy, creativity and ambition.

Closing the event, Marja Ruotanen, Director General of Democracy and Human Dignity, made the second commitment: the Manifesto "is not only a vision for 2049; it is a call to action for today", and "we will ensure that its recommendations are translated into concrete action through the finalisation of the New Democratic Pact".

The closing plenary framed the follow-up in three words – partnership, translation and investment, the latter also highlighted by the Chairs of the Joint Council on Youth and the Advisory Council on Youth.

³ In the final draft, related and overlapping ideas were combined for coherence, resulting in fifteen measures.

Notably, many of the Manifesto's proposals build on existing Council of Europe standards and practice, while others call for strengthening them through more durable guarantees for youth participation. Across the discussions, co-management emerged repeatedly as the clearest example of meaningful power-sharing between institutions and young people ("if adapted in other contexts, would already solve or help solving various other issues"). Participants also called for legally guaranteed and structurally funded local youth councils, stronger representation measures and participation structures with genuine decision-making authority, while some looked further ahead to the possibility of strengthening local youth participation through a binding convention. These measures would answer precisely the tension participants kept naming: being present in the room is not the same as having power in it. –

Several priorities emerged consistently in the closing discussions. First, sustained exchange – not a single flagship event, but a continuing conversation, with young people back in the room as the consultation is consolidated. Second, visibility – the ability to trace what happens to each proposal: which are taken up, where, and why others are not. Third, coherence – ensuring that the Council of Europe speaks with one voice, so that commitments made in one chamber are recognisable in another.

These priorities reflect how the Secretary General described the Pact: not as a document with a deadline, but as a continuous process – one that would mean democracy is alive. His image for it was the roof of a house, connecting rooms that would otherwise stand apart, with space for young people within it. The Manifesto joins that process: its fifteen measures are an attempt to translate democratic values into lived experience, offering youth sector's contribution to the Pact's continuing development. The initial consultation phase for the Pact closes in December 2026, with final outcomes and commitments expected in 2027, feeding the Organisation's priorities for the Programme and Budget 2028-2031.

Finally, the method was part of the message. A deliberative, participatory approach, with the final proposals debated and voted on across languages, backgrounds and genuine disagreement, is itself evidence of the kind of inclusive deliberative process the Council of Europe is seeking to promote. The event showed that such processes can deliver prioritised, honest and practical inputs. Throughout the three days, the generation routinely described as "the future" acted in the present, calling for rules rather than pilots, remedies rather than reassurance, and investment rather than invitation. The task now is to juvenate democracy: renewing its vitality, strengthening

its connection with younger generations and ensuring that young people have a meaningful role in shaping democratic life.

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Report drafting

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The Manifesto was drafted by Natalia Kallio (European Youth Forum) on the basis of the rapporteurs' records. The collection of session records was made possible by the rapporteurs listed above. The youth event was prepared by a team of representatives of the Advisory Council on Youth, the European Steering Committee for Youth (CDEJ) and the European Youth Forum.

The opinions expressed in this work are the responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the Council of Europe.

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ANNEXES

Annex A – Manifesto: youth visions for a European democracy in 2049

Annex B – Programme

Annex C – List of participants

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